

Bring Your Robot to Work Day

What does the \$15,000 Anybot tell us about the future of telecommuting?



BY ARIEL SCHWARTZ

MY FIRST MORNING in the FAST COMPANY office was an awkward affair. Bleary-eyed, I managed to navigate out of my editor's office, only to slam head-first into a glass door. I lurched down the hallway into the lobby area with the sound of giggling colleagues in the background.

At least it wasn't my flesh-and-blood body banging around the New York office. Instead, I was perched on my sofa in San Francisco, using a computer to control the QB, a \$15,000 "telepresence" robot that's essentially a teleconferencing system on wheels. The QB, a hybrid of WALL-E and a Segway, can sit, stand, roll around on its wheels, speak, display video on its forehead, and point a laser out of one of its "eyes."

Long tapped for factory work and perilous situations, robots

now want into our offices. I signed on to test-drive the bot for a week in advance of the QB's limited rollout this month by Anybots. The Silicon Valley startup will be entering a suddenly crowded white-collar-robot market: In the past year, fellow startups VGo and Willow Garage have also come out with bots. (Google cofounder Sergey Brin was recently spotted using Willow Garage's Texai robot.)

Proponents argue that such robots are the natural outgrowth of pervasive connectivity, inexpensive broadband, and the realization that constant business travel is taxing on both people and the planet. Dozens of remote employees could time-share one robot to slash travel and boost productivity. But most people had just one question when I rolled up on them in

the hallway: What's the point? Are workplace robots the next evolution of telepresence applications like Cisco's desktop apparatus, or is this just another sci-fi fantasy in search of a meaningful application?

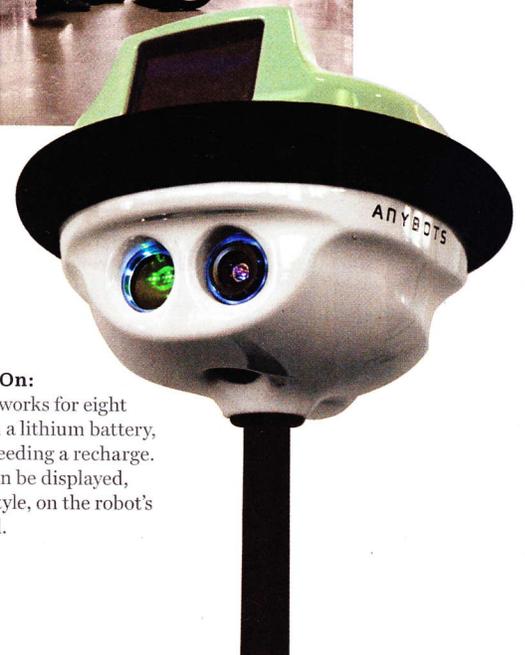
My first days of using the robot were mostly spent showboating for FAST COMPANY colleagues, but I soon settled in—and the giggling settled down—so I could get to work, participating in group meetings, reviewing layouts, and interviewing in-office sources.

QB picks up where teleconferencing leaves off, argues Anybots CEO Trevor Blackwell, a former leader of the Yahoo Store development group and current partner at Y Combinator. Blackwell founded Anybots way back in 2001, with the long-term ambition of helping

robots split the \$4 billion telepresence market with static teleconferencing. Robots, he says, are especially handy for plugging people into those watercooler conversations that often yield the best ideas.

"We've always had lots of remote people, and all of the real decisions happen informally," says Evernote CEO Phil Libin whose company has been testing a QB for three months at its Mountain View, California, headquarters. "The problem with videoconferencing is that it works well for prescheduled conferences but not for spur-of-the-moment casual conversations." Blackwell sums up his own videoconferencing woes that helped inspire him to create the bot: "It was such a common experience to be up on the screen and a group of people





Power On: The QB works for eight hours on a lithium battery, before needing a recharge. Video can be displayed, Skype-style, on the robot's forehead.

would wander out and continue their conversation. I'd be left there on the screen saying, 'Hey, guys, come back!'

Still, encountering R2D2's cousin on the way to the bathroom can be startling. "Not everyone is equally comfortable with it," Libin says, "but as people get more accustomed to seeing the thing, it won't be quite as noteworthy."

It doesn't hurt that QB eschews bells and whistles (and even arms) for a streamlined frame, says Sigurður Örn Aðalgeirsson, a PhD candidate in the Personal Robots Group at MIT. "When I look at QB, I have low expectations toward it. That lets you be more focused on the conversation and less focused on expecting the robot to do tricks."

For most travel-weary workers, the biggest trick may be one the QB already handles quite nicely: letting us stay where we are while also being where the action is, minus the carbon emissions spent and travel time lost. Americans on average spend 12.5 workdays a year commuting

(that's more time in transit than on vacation). And business travelers average seven trips per year.

"We are without a doubt the last generation to do this ridiculous amount of transport," says Paul Dickinson, CEO of the Carbon Disclosure Project. "It's got to stop, and it will stop." Still, Dickinson isn't sure robots will be the mass-market solution for redundant travel, given their high prices: "The big revolutions in tech—fax, email, web, mobile phones—achieved mass deployment with a simple, affordable unit that worked."

For most offices, that means videoconferencing will still trump QB in practicality. But the freedom of movement that a robot offers should not be wholly discounted. I have been to the FAST COMPANY offices only twice over the span of 18 months. But following my week with the QB, I recently had an in-the-flesh visit and found that I not only knew my way around but also remembered where individuals sat. I felt, in other words, as if I had just been there. **TC**